Labor History, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2000

Black Workers and the CIO's Turn Toward Racial Liberalism: Operation Dixie and the North Carolina Lumber Industry, 1946–1953

WILLIAM P. JONES*

"Run your car over the black son-of-a-bitch!," yelled Floyd Cross. Waving a shotgun, the white store owner leapt from his car and urged passing drivers to smash through the picket line that encircled Greene Brothers Lumber Company, Elizabethtown North Carolina's largest employer. With other members of the town's all-white Chamber of Commerce, the store owner and former mayor then "cursed and abused" the nearly 200 African-American strikers, according to a union report, "urging the by-standers to run them out of the county." The next day, company owners and managers looked on and laughed as Cross drove his own car through the picket line, forcing union supporters "to scatter and dodge" the speeding vehicle.[1] Like the Chamber of Commerce, local government officials provided consistent support for the lumber company. Police refused to enter the "colored quarters," the mill village where most African-American workers and their families lived, without permission from the company, and they arrested nearly every union member before the end of the strike.[2] White workers also remained loyal to the company, refusing to join the union and performing dangerous and difficult "black jobs" in order to sustain production through the five-month strike. In the eyes of white observers, "A strike against the mill was a strike against the town."[3]

White reaction to the 1948 strike against the Greene Brothers Lumber Company demonstrated how closely race and class lines corresponded in eastern North Carolina. African-Americans had been excluded from North Carolina's political sphere since a violent white supremacy campaign ended a fledgling interracial democracy in the 1890s.[4] In small towns, where most whites owned land or stores and most blacks worked as wage laborers, a racialized political order upheld a class structure that ensured that white employers had access to a cheap and reliable source of black labor.

*Thanks to those on both sides of the 1948 strike who shared their memories and records of these events, particularly Adel McDowell, F.W. Newton, and Ben Greene. Thanks also to those who have read drafts of this paper, particularly Bob Korstad, David Cecelski, Leon Fink, David Anderson, Eric Arnesen, Pete Daniel and Bob Zieger. Research for this essay was supported by grants from the Southern Oral History Program and the Department of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[1]"Synopsis of Incidents at Greene Brothers Lumber Company Since the Beginning of Organization to the Present Date," Operation Dixie: The CIO Organizing Committee Papers, 1946–1953. Duke University Special Collections, Perkins Library, Durham, NC (hereafter cited as ODP), Box 64, Folder 4.

[2]Orie and Louise Tyson, interview with author, Sept. 1, 1996, Southern Oral History Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[3]Ben Greene, interview with author, May 16, 1996, Southern Oral History Collection.

[4]See David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson, eds., *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

ISSN 0023-656X print/ISSN 1469-9702 online/00/030279–28

Black workers challenged both of these Jim Crow hierarchies when they built a union in Elizabethtown between 1946 and 1953. Building on family and community networks and supported by the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), black lumber workers sustained a five-month strike in the face of evictions, arrests, and violence. As union locals across eastern North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia built on the momentum started in Elizabethtown, they demonstrated the possibility that unions could be built in the South after the Second World War. At the same time, unions created a basis for black working-class activism that would eventually overthrow white political supremacy in eastern North Carolina.

Southern unions did not achieve the "labor–capital accord" that became the basis for working-class political power in northern states after the Second World War.[5] Rather than spearheading unionization across the region in the 1950s, North Carolina became one of the least unionized states in the nation, second only to neighboring South Carolina.[6] The failure of southern unions has led some historians to argue that the post-war accord could never have been established in the sawmills, textile mills or mines of Dixie. The only book-length study of Operation Dixie, the CIO's million dollar southern organizing that lasted from 1946 to 1953, concludes that well-organized businessmen, conservative workers and a fractured national leadership doomed the campaign from its beginning. The southern campaign ended, readers are led to believe, with the CIO's decisive defeat at Kannapolis, North Carolina in 1946.[7]

While recent studies share a long-held skepticism about the possibilities for organizing the South, they differ over where to place the blame for Operation Dixie's failure. On one hand are those who attribute defeat to the stability of white-ruled southern society. Whether they blame southern politicians' opposition to New Deal labor policy or white workers' allegiance to white supremacy, various scholars argue that CIO leaders' hesitation from a full-scale confrontation with southern social structures "made obvious sense" in the post-war period.[8] Other scholars identify alternative strategies that may have led to a more successful southern campaign. The most commonly cited of these alternatives was a "labor-oriented civil rights movement" that grew out of the left-liberal Popular Front alliance of the early 1940s. These studies show that Communist-led unions spearheaded the organization of black majority workplaces in the South during the Second World War, and conclude that anti-communism destroyed this

[5]See Nelson Lichtenstein, "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era," in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 122–152.

[6]In the 1990s, unions represent 10% of all private sector employees in the United States, but only 2.5% in North Carolina. Bob Williams, [Raleigh] *News and Observer*, Aug. 31, 1997, 1.

[7]Barbara Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988). For an assessment of older literature on Operation Dixie, see Michael Goldfield, "The Failure of Operation Dixie: A Critical Turning Point in American Political Development?" in Gary M. Fink and Merl E. Reed, eds., *Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History* (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1994), 166–189.

[8]Robert E. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 240. Also see Rick Halpern, "The CIO and the Limits of Labor based Civil Rights Activism: The Case of Louisiana's Sugar Workers, 1947–1966," Alex Lichtenstein, " 'Scientific Unionism' and the 'Negro Question': Communists and the Transport Workers Union in Miami, 1944–1949," both in Robert Zieger, ed. *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940–1995* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), and Bruce Nelson, "Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile during World War II," *Journal of American History*, 80 (1993), 952–988.

radical alternative after the war, leaving more cautious liberals in uncontested leadership of the CIO.[9]

By focusing on union leaders, white workers, and southern elites, each of these interpretations takes readers' attention away from the black working-class communities which, I argue, were most important to Operation Dixie's success in eastern North Carolina. Elizabethtown's black working class took both organizers and local employers by surprise, and acted independently of white workers, when it sparked a wave of labor activity that spread through other lumber mill communities in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Not only did black workers challenge the local Jim Crow order that had ruled Elizabethtown since the late 19th century, they also forced leaders of the IWA and the CIO to reconsider their approaches to organizing black workers in the South. Previously committed to a race-neutral "economic" approach to organizing black and white workers, union leaders learned from their experience in eastern North Carolina that class-based organizing could not be isolated from the racial politics of the Jim Crow South.

* * * * * *

Class conflict in eastern North Carolina lumber mills was shaped by racial hiring practices that emerged in the early 20th century. When lumber companies started operating in the South after the Civil War, they hired relatively equal numbers of black and white workers. The bulk of their workforce came from family farmers who sought seasonal wage employment as a supplement to their primary occupations. Chronically undercapitalized, and reliant upon a seasonal workforce, lumber helped set the pattern of low-wage extractive manufacturing that characterized the industrial South.[10] Not until the second decade of the 20th century did southern lumber companies begin to reflect what economic historian Gavin Wright has called the "new tradition" of labor market segregation that came to characterize southern industry in the 1920s.[11] The proliferation of cross-cut saws allowed lumber companies to replace predominantly white ax men with less skilled, usually black, "fellers" in logging operations. Sawmills further proletarianized their workforces by directly hiring logging teams that had previously worked as independent contractors.[12]

After the First World War, the racial bifurcation of southern wage scales increased

[9]Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History*, 75 (1988), 811. See also Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), Robert K. Korstad, "Daybreak of Freedom: Tobacco Workers and the CIO in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1943–1950" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1987) and Michael Goldfield, Gary Gerstle, Robert Korstad, Marshall F. Stevenson, and Judith Stein, "Scholarly Controversy: Race and the CIO: The Possibilities for Racial Egalitarianism During the 1930s and 1940s," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 44 (1993), 1–16.

[10]Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 156–189.

[11]Wright, 197.

[12]Research and Statistics Branch, "Minimum Wages in the Lumber and Timber Products Industry," Southern Pine Association Collection, Box 469, Folder 161, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University, June 1941; Charles Phillip Sawaya, "The Employment Effects of Minimum Wage Regulation in the Southern Pine Lumber Industry" (unpublished PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 1958); Jeffrey A. Drobney, *Lumbermen and Log Sawyers: Life, Labor and Culture in the North Florida Timber Industry, 1830–1930* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 61–91.

black workers' reliance upon lumber employment. As farm income declined in the 1920s, white workers either moved into textile work or became increasingly protective of skilled lumber jobs that paid enough wages to allow them to abandon farm work permanently. Excluded from skilled lumber work and most textile jobs, black workers still preferred unskilled lumber jobs to even less lucrative work as agriculture laborers.[13] Brutal repression of interracial union drives during World War I prevented black and white lumber workers from increasing their wages or improving working conditions through class-based organization. The few unions that did survive the decade primarily served to protect "white jobs" from black workers.[14] By the mid-1920s, the labor market in southern lumber production featured a pyramid-like structure, with white skilled workers at the top, semi- and unskilled black workers at the base.[15] In eastern North Carolina in 1943, over 75% of all lumber workers were black. In unskilled jobs this proportion approached 90%.[16]

The Greene Brothers Lumber Company had moved from Alabama in 1932 to North Carolina where it opened a small mill near Fayetteville. In 1938, the firm bought Collie Swamp, a 10,000 acre stand of old growth cypress and pine timber 40 miles inland from Wilmington. The Greenes built a large sawmill, planing mill, and concentration yard 10 miles away from the swamp in Elizabethtown. When the company relocated, personal networks conspired with customary racial employment restrictions to maintain a nearly all black workforce in the Greenes' milling and logging operations.

Black workers Waymond and Orie Tyson had first worked at the Greene Brothers' Alabama mill between agricultural seasons. Finding sharecropping too similar to "slavery time," Orie explained, the brothers followed the company to North Carolina in order to avoid abuse from white landlords.[17] Lonnie Johnson, a child of sharecroppers in South Carolina, hitch-hiked to Elizabethtown in 1939 after hearing of the high wages paid at the Greenes' mill. Lured by wages, adventure, and escape from agricultural life, these men joined thousands of young African-Americans who sought work in sawmills and lumbering camps during the 1930s and 1940s.[18]

Whereas economic and technological changes had shaped racial employment patterns in the first decades of the century, the distinction between "black jobs" and "white jobs" became self-perpetuating by the 1930s.[19] Orie Tyson recalled that lumber

---

[13]Wright, 124–156.

[14]Stephen H. Norwood, "Bogalusa Burning: The War Against Biracial Unionism in the Deep South, 1919," *Journal of Southern History*, 63(3) (1997), 591–628; James E. Fickle, *The New South and the "New Competition": Trade Association Development in the Southern Pine Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 1–32; Joel Gardner, *Built in Louisiana: A Social History of Louisiana Carpenters* (New Orleans: Louisiana Council of Carpenters, 1985).

[15]Wright, 81–123.

[16]A 1945 study found that 60% of southern pine workers were black. Since these regional and state census figures include Appalachian and upland farming lumbering operations, which employed largely white workforces, a closer look at the lumber trade reveals sharper race segregation than the overall numbers suggest John C. Howard, *The Racial Policies of American Industry, Report No. 19: The Negro in the Lumber Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970). See also Vernon H. Jensen, *Lumber and Labor* (New York: J.J. Little and Ives Co., 1945), 76–77.

[17]Orie and Louise Tyson, interview with author, Sept. 1, 1996; Waymond Tyson, interview with author, Sept. 1, 1996, Southern Oral History Collection.

[18]Lonnie Johnson [pseudonym], interview with author, May 16, 1996. In possession of author, closed to public.

[19]In 1996, I conducted three interviews with men who had worked at the Greenes, three with wives of men who worked there, and three with members of the Greene family. All nine of these individuals had participated on one side or the other of the 1948 strike.

producers throughout the South hired only black workers for unskilled positions. Even "Indians," Tyson observed, "like white folks, didn't do sawmill work," although companies did hire Native Americans as replacement workers, as the Greenes did during the 1948 strike.[20] Many black workers had more experience than their white counterparts, and even trained white workers for jobs that they were officially prevented from holding. Nevertheless, black workers held jobs that were classified on southern lumber company payrolls as "unskilled," or occasionally "semi-skilled." In this sense, "skill" became a racial category rather than an indication of proficiency.[21] Employers assigned jobs according to race; one worker recalled, "It didn't make any difference what you could do."[22]

Every stage of lumber production, from harvesting logs to sawing and planing boards, required heavy physical labor under brutal and dangerous conditions, work reserved throughout the South for African-Americans.[23] The Greenes' logging crews traveled by rail into Collie Swamp each morning before dawn. Orie Tyson noted that the loggers worked the "can't to can't" shift. So long were their hours, he explained, that "you can't see when you go; can't see when you get off." Working in pairs, loggers waded through snake-infested waters to fell cypress and pine trees with hand-powered cross-cut saws. While loggers cut down trees, riggers strung cables between fallen trees and the "skidder," a steam winch mounted on log trains that ran through the center of the swamp. The team then stood clear while the skidder pulled entire logs through the swamps, crushing small trees and occasionally inattentive workers in the process. Logging crews selected the most valuable trees, and cutters sawed or axed logs, preserving the highest quality pieces. The company brought black workers from as far as Alabama, according to Cecil Greene's son Ben, because they knew what to cut and "knew how to work in woods without getting hurt."[24]

The racial division of labor in southern lumber operations was so well established by the late 1940s that many whites considered it a natural consequence of inherent differences between black and white workers. Black workers held 80% of the jobs at Greene Brothers Lumber Company, but they were concentrated in low-paid, manual positions in the sawmill, lumber yard, and logging crews. Only two out of 17 foremen at the mill were black, and white workers monopolized well-paid, lighter work in the planing mill.[25] One Greene executive asserted that lumbering skills were "something [that black workers] grew up with and knew how to do well."[26]

In a 1938 article, a white journalist exoticized the Greenes' operation in Collie Swamp with language that might have reminded contemporary readers of Africa or

---

[20]Orie and Louise Tyson, interview with author, Sept. 1, 1996.

[21]A report issued by the Southern Pine Association in 1934 explained that "for comparative purposes, you may classify as 'common labor' all paid the minimum wage rate; as 'skilled labor' all paid more than the minimum wage rate." Demonstrating the racial implications of pay scales, a similar report clarified that "Negro skilled labor [was] classified by some as 'semi-skilled' and usually needing closer supervision than white skilled labor." Southern Pine Association, "Labor Conditions in Southern Pine Industry," Mar. 3, 1934 and June 19, 1933, National Recovery Administration Records, Consolidated Approved Code Industry Files, Lumber and Timber, Box 3378, National Archives, Washington, DC.

[22]Lonnie Johnson [pseudonym], interview with author, May 16, 1996.

[23]Howard, *The Racial Policies of American Industry*, 5.

[24]Ben Greene, interview with author, May 16, 1996.

[25]"Green Brothers Lumber Company," Employee List, n.d. [*c.* 1947], Operation Dixie: The CIO Organizing Committee Papers, 1946–1953, Microfilm Edition [hereafter cited as ODP Microfilm], Reel 5.

[26]*Ibid.*

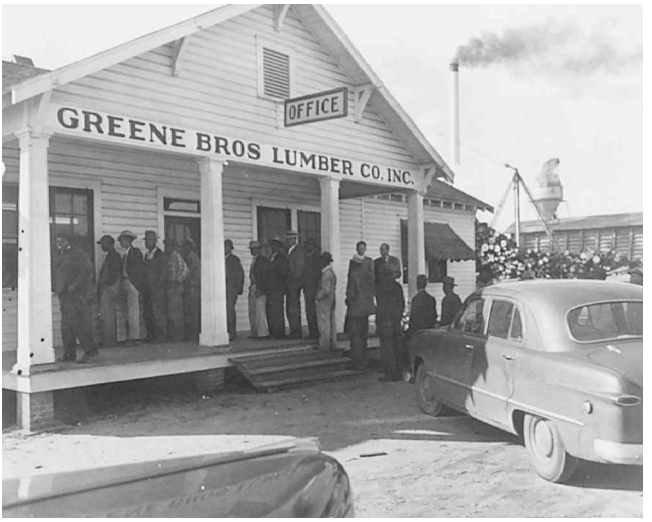

FIG. 1. Greene Brothers employees line up on pay day.

South America. During a hunting excursion into the "water-logged marsh of a remote, almost inaccessible swampland" the journalist had come across a "crew of approximately 30 men; some 'geachy' Negro men, some not of the 'geachy' strain."[27] "Geachy" referred to African-Americans from coastal South Carolina, a "strain" according to mill owner's son Alvin Greene Jr. that possessed excellent lumber skills.[28] The journalist was especially impressed by the ease with which LeRoy Johnson and Capers Eady—"muscular, breathing as lightly as one at ease in a porch chair"—felled trees in their "jungle" workplace. The racialization of lumbering skills in the South even appeared in a 1946 publication of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which reported that a steam-powered arm that replaced unskilled workers in southern sawmills was now being called a "steam nigger."[29]

Given the heavy concentration of black workers in the southern lumber industry, it should come as no surprise that lumber workers suffered disabling injuries on the job far more frequently than workers in any other industry. Logging workers suffered 92 disabling injuries during every million employee hours worked in 1945. The injury rate among sawmill workers was lower but, according to the Department of Labor, it was still "far ahead" of the national average for all manufacturing industries.[30] Government investigations revealed that rapid mechanization exacerbated already alarming rates of injury during the 1930s and 1940s, a finding supported by workers' experience at Greene Brothers.[31] Lonnie Johnson witnessed his brother-in-law Ben Bailey's lethal electrocution when Bailey touched a faulty power switch on the rip-saw that the two workers operated. Johnson saw five more workers killed during the 15 years he worked

[27]Staley A. Cook, "Swamps Yield Riches in Timber: Logging Crews Working Daily in Carolina," *Daily News* (Greensboro, NC), November 6, 1938, B, 10.

[28]Alvin Greene, interview with author, June 25, 1996.

[29]Eugene J. Lowther and Roland V. Murray, "Labor Requirements in Southern Pine Lumber Production," *Monthly Labor Review*, Dec. 1946, 1–11.

[30]"Work Injuries in the United States During 1945," *Monthly Labor Review*, Sept. 1946, 1–11.

[31]Max D. Kossoris and Frank S. McElroy, "Causes and Prevention of Accidents In Logging and Lumber Mills, 1940," *Monthly Labor Review*, Dec. 1941.

in the Greenes' sawmill, and he refused to take more dangerous logging jobs in the swamps.[32]

Social mores of the Jim Crow South limited black workers' ability to stray from jobs and social spaces that according to racial ideology were their natural places. One-third of Elizabethtown's 2480 residents were African-American. Those black families that did not live in the company's "colored quarters" resided in the all-black Newtown, just outside the city limits. Unless they worked in them, black people were prohibited from most downtown shops, and they entered white homes only through the back door as maids or cooks. The segregation of public life meant that black and white workers of either sex rarely competed for the same jobs.[33]

Corporate paternalism built upon social segregation to increase employers' control over the black labor market. Excluded from town housing, black workers rented cottages in the company-owned "colored quarters." To supplement their low wages, they relied upon company-issued credit books that were redeemable only at the company store. After settling their debts each payday, 90% of the Greenes' workers received no check at all. Waymond Tyson recalled that this cash-less economy allowed southern industrialists to maintain a reputation for benevolence while paying such low wages. The Greenes could afford to provide housing, food, doctors, and loans to their workers, Tyson explained, because they were "already takin' what you make."[34]

In the 1930s and 1940s, southern lumber companies coordinated their power in local affairs with regional political and economic powers. In 1933, a year after the Greenes arrived in North Carolina, lumber companies in the state joined the Southern Pine Association (SPA), an employers' organization formed in response to interracial strikes during the First World War. Throughout the 1930s, the SPA had lobbied the federal government to set minimum wages for southern lumber below those of other industries. During the Second World War, the SPA lobbied for government assistance to lumber companies, and succeeded in obtaining contracts for German prisoners-of-war whose labor allowed the Greenes to maintain round-the-clock operation.[35] The Greenes utilized the services of the SPA to enjoy uninterrupted profits from the war-time boom, while less wealthy black and white North Carolinians lost family farms to military base construction.[36]

War solidified the Greenes' lumber empire in North Carolina. By 1945 the company employed 230 workers and cut 20,000,000 board feet of lumber every year. Valued at over $1,000,000, the firm owned 20,000 acres of timber land. According to a 1949 newspaper report, the Greenes lived in "two of the most attractive homes in eastern North Carolina" and were important leaders in "civic affairs" in the small town. So "far-flung and profitable" was the brothers' business that they bought an $80,000

---

[32]Lonnie Johnson [pseudonym], interview with author, Elizabethtown, NC, May 16, 1996.

[33]"Elizabethtown, North Carolina: An Invitation to Industry," Pamphlet published by the Elizabethtown Chamber of Commerce, 1957, Local History Collection, Elizabethtown Public Library; Orie and Louise Tyson, interview with author, Sept. 1, 1996.

[34]*International Woodworker*, December 29, 1948; Adel McDowell and Leah Betty Lewis, interview with author, June 5, 1996; Ben Greene, interview with author, May 16, 1996; Waymond Tyson, interview with author, Sept. 1, 1996. For an explanation of the importance of credit in the rural South see Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclass from the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 136–140.

[35]Ben Greene, interview with author, May 16, 1996; James E. Fickle, *The New South and the "New Competition."*

[36]David S. Cecelski, "The Home Front's Dispossessed," *Southern Exposure*, Summer 1995, 37–41.

private plane to conduct business in New York and other cities. The Greenes, boasted the newspaper, "are flying ahead in more ways than one. And Elizabethtown is mighty proud of their progress."[37] Through tight control over local labor markets and membership in the influential SPA, the Greenes had become trendsetters in the Jim Crow paternalism that formed the lumber industry's backbone.[38]

* * * * * *

In much the same way that lumber companies utilized wartime changes to consolidate their control over black labor, black workers also used wartime labor shortages to strengthen their position in the southern labor market.[39] In North Carolina and much of the South, the draft opened previously "white" industrial jobs to black workers who then used the labor shortage to leverage higher wages and better working conditions in their new jobs. Barney Hayes, who would be evicted from Greene Brothers Lumber Company housing during the 1948 strike, noted that his boss displayed no gratitude to the workers who "had stayed with him all during the war and had gived [sic] him no trouble."[40] Hayes' complaint was a recognition that the Greenes had depended upon his labor during the war. It also suggests that he had alternatives in his choice of employment. Lumber work had offered higher earnings than agriculture in the 1930s, but jobs at military bases, airfields and shipyards provided wages and working conditions far more attractive than lumber work in the mid-1940s. War industries paid between sixty cents and a dollar-fifty per hour for common labor. Faced with that competition, the prevailing wage in lumber rose five cents above the federally mandated minimum wage, marking the first time that average wages at southern lumber mills rose above government standards.[41]

Even before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Southern Pine Association identified the labor shortage as "by far the gravest problem" that they would face if the U.S. entered the war. The SPA helped companies to secure draft deferments for skilled workers, and organized an Army Salute to Wood Caravan that visited Elizabethtown and 40 other southern sawmill towns in 1943. The entourage of 475 foresters, military officers and "war heroes," extolled to lumber workers and their families the importance of increasing production and reducing "the migration of workers to other industries." Lumber companies began hiring women to replace men who were drafted into the service, but the SPA found that "Negro women [were] not as enthusiastic about working" in lumber, "since their husbands [were] generally making more money than ever before."[42]

---

[37]"Elizabethtown Citizens Made Good Investment," *Fayetteville Observer*, June 23, 1949, 1–2.

[38]"Greene Gold," *Esso Oilways* [n.d.], article in possession of author.

[39]Harvard Sitkoff has criticized historians' acceptance of the myth that the Second World War radicalized organized black protest. Neil McMillen counters Sitkoff's charge with the claim that organized protest was not the most important legacy of the war. In interviews with black veterans from Mississippi, McMillen found that black southerners emerged from the war with a renewed belief in their ability to destroy Jim Crow. The absence of mass protest during the war, McMillen argues, indicated a lack of organizational and institutional strength, not a lack of heightened expectations. Both essays in Neil R. McMillen, ed., *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997).

[40]Barney Hayes, Affidavit, Sept./Oct. 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[41]Sawaya, "The Employment Effects of Minimum Wage Regulation in the Southern Pine Lumber Industry."

[42]"Outline of Cooperation by Southern Pine War Committee with War Department's Morale-Building Program in the Southern Lumber Industry," 1943, and "Army 'Salute to Wood' Caravan," 1943, Southern Pine Association Collection, Box 747, Vol. III.

Elijah Jackson, a black CIO organizer who would later help organize the IWA local in Elizabethtown, witnessed what was perhaps the single most dramatic conflict brought by wartime changes in the southern political economy. Sent to Mobile, Alabama, to recruit black workers into the International Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America (IUMSWA) in 1943, Jackson arrived just in time to watch rioting white workers use pipes, clubs, and other weapons to drive black workers from the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company. Rather than abandoning hope, he reached out for support from local civil rights organizations. In 1944 the CIO organizer became chairman of the finance committee of the Mobile branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), working, according to another branch officer, to help NAACP members "come to know and love the CIO."[43]

One might imagine that Jackson's work would have endeared him to Mobile's union leadership, but white workers and union activists felt threatened by his efforts to increase black political and institutional power in the Alabama seaport. As black workers grew more confident within the union, white unionists complained that they were becoming more "boisterous." They charged Jackson with cultivating an "insubordinate and aggressive attitude" among the black rank-and-file. In the face of NAACP leaders' insistence that both "the CIO and our race" had benefited from Jackson's work in Mobile, CIO union leaders transferred the black organizer to another IUMSWA campaign at the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company in Wilmington, North Carolina.[44]

Just as Mobile provided a place for black Alabama workers to learn about unions, wartime shipbuilding jobs also provided black workers in North Carolina with their first union experience. Thomas McDowell, who would become president of the Elizabethtown Local s-489, left Greene Brothers soon after the war started to work at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville. He later found employment at the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company in Wilmington, riding each day with Rudolph Potter, another Greene employee who bought a bus to haul workers 50 miles from Elizabethtown to the coast.[45] Along with Lonnie Johnson, who would also become a leader in the 1948 strike, McDowell gained his first union experience working at the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company.[46]

Jackson arrived in Wilmington disappointed at having to leave Mobile in the midst of a successful NAACP drive. "I did want so much to see a membership of 10,000 in the Mobile Branch before leaving there," he wrote to NAACP branch director Ella Baker. "Within the first three weeks of our sixty day drive, we had far surpassed the whole membership for all of last year." In spite of his set-back, Jackson set to repeating that success in his new assignment. He requested 200 membership cards in order to revive the branch of the NAACP, and thanked the NAACP national officer for "the great work that [she was] carrying on in the interest of our race."[47]

Wilmington proved no less challenging than Jackson's previous assignment. When the IUMSWA initiated organization at North Carolina Shipbuilding, a Colored Ship-

[43]Bruce Nelson, "Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile During World War II," 982–988.

[44]*Ibid.*

[45]Lewis and McDowell, interview with author, June 5, 1996; Cecelski, "The Home Front's Dispossessed."

[46]Lonnie Johnson [pseudonym], interview with author, May 16, 1996.

[47]E. Jackson to Miss Ella Baker, June 27, 1945, papers of the NAACP, Part I, Box C140, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

builders Association ran a full page advertisement in a local paper denouncing the CIO and advising black workers not to join in the union drive. Responding to an appeal from William Smith, who was then the southern director of the IUMSWA, Baker investigated the source of the advertisement. She discovered that a small group of conservative members of the NAACP had sponsored the advertisement over the objections of other branch members, many of whom belonged to the CIO union. Facing such a challenge, the NAACP branch director was pleased to hear of Jackson's transfer "to battle with the labor problem in Wilmington." She promised that the NAACP was "only too glad to cooperate with you in renewing the work" of both organizations.[48] A strong anti-union campaign defeated the CIO, but not before hundreds of black workers, several of them from Elizabethtown, gained an important introduction to union politics. The shipyard cut back its workforce after the war, sending Johnson and his comrades back to Elizabethtown as experienced union members.

Black union activity during the Second World War built upon a deep-rooted culture of resistance that had sustained southern black communities through the darkest days of the Jim Crow era.[49] Thomas McDowell's wife, Adel, explained later that black communities in eastern North Carolina forged strong family and community networks to withstand the restrictions placed upon them by white supremacy. For example, black students who were excluded from white high schools in their home communities lived with relatives and friends when they attended Bladen County's only black high school, which was in Elizabethtown. One of these students Adel McDowell, born on a farm in Leland, lived with Elizabethtown minister Reverend John Ham while attending high school. She stayed in the county seat after graduation, where she met her future husband Thomas at Elizabethtown's Mt. Zion African Methodist Episcopal Zion church, one of black Elizabethtown's only public institutions and a meeting place during the 1948 strike.[50]

* * * * * *

Unions had tested the resilience of southern African-American communities only sporadically before the Second World War. After a dramatic defeat in Louisiana during the First World War, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) restricted its southern organizational activity in the lumber industry primarily to skilled white workers.[51] Southern industrial drives led by the AFL in the early 1930s and by the CIO in the late 1930s concentrated primarily upon white workers in textile, steel, and mining industries. Wartime labor shortages aided organizational efforts in these industries, and the CIO emerged from the Second World War with a quarter of a million southern members.[52]

---

[48]Ella J. Baker, letter to Mr. E.J. George, 703 So. 8th Street, Wilmington, NC, Sept. 9, 1943, papers of the NAACP, Part I, Box C 140; William Smith, letter to Walter White, Dec. 23, 1943, NAACP papers, Group II, Box A 347.

[49]Robin D.G. Kelley, " 'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History*, 80 (June 1993), pp. 75–112.

[50]McDowell and Lewis, interview with author, June 5, 1996.

[51]See Norwood, "Bogalusa Burning," and Daniel Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878–1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 157–190.

[52]Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955*, 76–77; Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 373–406; Robert Carlton Dinwiddie, "The International Woodworkers of America and Southern Laborers, 1937–1945" (unpublished PhD dissertation, Georgia State University, 1980).

By the end of the Second World War, CIO organizational strategists agreed that the South was "the best place for the CIO" to focus its organizational efforts.[53] Competition with unorganized southern workers depressed union wages in the North and tempted northern factories to relocate to the low-wage region. Additionally, conservative southern Democrats had succeeded in weakening and even defeating important labor legislation during the 1930s, and they threatened to strengthen anti-labor Congressional forces in the 1940s. Affiliated CIO unions contributed more than $1,000,000, and 250 organizers set out from the Southern Organizing Committee office in Atlanta to organize unions in the South's major industries—textiles, lumber, coal, and iron and steel.[54] Unofficially dubbed "Operation Dixie," the southern campaign began in June 1946.[55]

From the start of the southern campaign, Operation Dixie's strategists espoused a New Deal liberalism which, according to historian Gary Gerstle, emphasized "economic" over "cultural" politics.[56] Claiming the ideological mantle of "the period of 1937," when industrial unions had swept rapidly into northern factories, CIO leaders believed that southern workers could transcend racial differences in the same way that ethnic and religious differences had been overcome in northern industries.[57] The IWA's weekly newspaper ran a cartoon during Operation Dixie that illustrated the mechanics of interracial shop-floor solidarity. In the cartoon, a white worker built a wall of "Brotherhood" from bricks marked "All Races," "All Creeds," "All Religions," and "All Nations." The caption explained that Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Greek, Negro, Yankee, and Swedish woodworkers learn the "simple truths of democracy" by working alongside each other. "Remember," the union newspaper proclaimed, "that democracy begins in every day living."[58]

While appeals to class solidarity made sense in the North's interracial workplaces, such a strategy provided little guidance for organizing the segregated labor markets that were typical of southern industry. Those unions that organized most effectively in the South during the Second World War were Communist-led organizations that rejected class-based liberalism for a race-conscious radicalism.[59] While organizing black tobacco workers in Winston-Salem, for example, the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers of America (FTA) harnessed race and gender grievances into a powerful, class-based social movement in the mid-1940s.[60] The FTA, along with the Southern

[53]Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955*, 231.

[54]"Labor Drives South: The CIO, with the AFL in Full Pursuit, sets out for the last US Labor Frontier," *Fortune*, 34(5) (Nov. 1946), 134–237; Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor*

[55]Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955*, 232.

[56]Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," *American Historical Review* (Oct. 1994), 1045.

[57]David McDonald, quoted in Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955*, 233; August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Lizbeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 333–349.

[58]"Brotherhood Week," *International Woodworker*, Feb. 24, 1948, 1.

[59]Gary Gerstle, "Working-Class Racism: Broaden the Focus," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 44 (Fall 1993), 34. See also Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917–1936* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), and Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

[60]Larry J. Griffin and Robert R. Korstad, "Class as Race and Gender: Making and Breaking a Labor Union in the Jim Crow South," *Social Science History*, 19(4) (1995), 425–454; Korstad and Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost," 793.

Conference on Human Welfare and the Highlander Folk School, represented a left-wing minority among southern progressives who rejected the CIO's cautious approach to fighting racism.[61]

In the context of the early Cold War, CIO leaders linked debate over racial policy with an effort to distance the southern campaign from charges of radicalism. Seeking to dispel charges that Operation Dixie threatened to overturn the southern social order, CIO president Phillip Murray had appointed what the conservative *Saturday Evening Post* labeled "practical" leaders like William Smith and Van Bittner, rather than the "theorists who want a freshly laundered world next Monday morning." Bittner, the first director of the southern campaign, and Smith, who headed Operation Dixie in North Carolina, both subscribed, according to the *Post*, to the "economic approach rather than the approach of idealism." Murray wanted men who believed that the question, " 'You want your pay raised, don't you?' is a more effective gambit than a long talk about human equality and human rights."[62]

In their efforts to distinguish Operation Dixie from left-wing forces, CIO leaders advocated New Deal liberalism as an alternative to racial politics. William Smith dismissed the FTA's strategy as a "negro nationalist approach which could easily prove dangerous to us." Objecting to a pamphlet created for an FTA tobacco drive in eastern North Carolina, the state CIO director asserted that tobacco unions were already succeeding "without the need of elaborating on the racial issue," and that such "material could very easily boomerang on us and be used by" rival AFL unions that portrayed the CIO as advancing the interests of black workers over those of whites.[63] "We are not mentioning the color of people," Bittner declared. CIO leaders insisted that "there was no Negro problem in the South."[64]

In addition to isolating Operation Dixie from the left, which had provided key support for northern campaigns in the 1930s, CIO leaders' rigid dismissal of racial politics left them without a clear strategy for bridging the gap between the South's segregated labor markets. *Fortune* magazine reported in the first months of the southern campaign that "Bittner and his associates are hewing singly to the job of building unions, and they have no desire at the moment to undertake a crusading job on race relations." This narrow focus distanced the CIO, according to *Fortune*, from the idealism that in the 1930s had distinguished the Congress from the older and more conservative AFL. CIO organizers had created more interracial locals than the AFL and they provided "direct and automatic" responses to workplace grievances of black members. Similarities, however, "far outweighed the differences" between the two unions. Bittner's counterpart in the AFL would go "to bat as quickly as any C.I.O. leader in support of" interracial unionism.[65] Operation Dixie's chief strategists, *Fortune* concluded, viewed a challenge to Jim Crow as "someone else's wrestling match. Their stated position in regard to the Negro is that they believe in economic equality—that is equal pay for equal jobs."[66]

---

[61]See Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 193–220.

[62]Milton MacKaye, "The CIO Invades Dixie," *Saturday Evening Post*, July 20, 1946, 12, 94–99.

[63]William Smith, Letter to Frank Green, Oct. 3, 1946, CIO Organizing Committee Papers, Box 56, Folder 8, Duke University Special Collections, Perkins Library, Durham, NC.

[64]Bittner quoted in Zieger, *The CIO*, 234.

[65]"Labor Drives South: The CIO with the AFofL in Full Pursuit, Sets Out for the Last US Labor Frontier. The Question: Can They Make it Before the Collapse of Cotton?" *Fortune*, 34 (Nov. 1946), 230.

[66]MacKaye, "The CIO Invades Dixie," 94.

As Smith indicated in his reaction to the FTA flyer, union leaders saw no way to organize large numbers of black workers without losing the support of white workers, particularly those in the important textile industry. The initial inspiration for Operation Dixie stemmed from "runaway shops"—which originally referred to textile firms transplanted from the North to the South during the Second World War. Of the South's 7,000,000 service and industrial workers, 1,600,000 worked in the region's four basic industries—textiles, wood, coal, and iron and steel. Textile workers composed nearly a third of those in basic industries; more than three-quarters of all U.S. cotton textile workers lived in the South.[67] For some organizers, the fate of the entire southern campaign rested on the fate of that one industry.[68]

Fears of alienating white workers were sharpened by the crushing defeat of Operation Dixie's first textile campaign. In the spring of 1946, D. L. Culver, a white southerner and a 32-year veteran of pre-war labor organizing, led a CIO team in Kannapolis, a sprawling North Carolina Piedmont textile mill town. Fearing loss of favor from the company that controlled nearly all aspects of their lives, Cannon Mill's 24,000 mostly white employees stayed clear of union organizers. A post-war textile boom allowed non-union companies to increase wages steadily, closing the gap between them and unionized plants and undermining the advantage of joining the CIO.[69] In October 1946, the CIO organizing committee replaced Culver as head of the organizing team, and by the end of the year his two successors were also fired by CIO leaders, who were frustrated by the lack of progress. After one year, the CIO had won less than half of the 47 union elections held in southern textile mills. The majority of textile mills in the South never even conducted an election to determine union representation.[70]

In spite of their dismay, however, CIO organizers did not allow the defeats in the textile industry to destroy the entire southern campaign. As they moved into lumber, which *Fortune* magazine tagged as "No. 2 on the CIO agenda," unionists faced the additional challenge of a largely black and previously unorganized workforce. Organization in lumber would be further complicated by the fact that a majority of the South's 650,000 lumber workers labored in isolated mills that would have to be organized one at a time.[71] While textiles employed mostly "white skilled labor," read an article in the *Saturday Evening Post*, lumber had "a heavy percentage of Negro labor." Even the *Post*, not known for labor analysis, predicted difficulty for the CIO: " ... a quick look at traditional prejudice easily satisfies the neutral observer that lumber will be a tough ear to shuck."[72]

Union organizers assured themselves that they could meet the challenge presented by organizing black lumber workers. In November 1946, a CIO organizer told delegates to the IWA's annual convention that his experiences while inspecting Operation Dixie Campaigns in their first months made him optimistic about the prospects of organizing southern lumber workers. He related a conversation that he had with a "colored lady" who sat next to him at a strategy session in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The Secretary and Grievance Chairman of a union local in Atlanta, the woman spoke of union meetings held under an oak tree because they had no hall. "I think of this devotion and

[67]"Labor Drives South," 137.

[68]Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor*, 75.

[69]Timothy J. Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For? The TWUA in the South, 1945–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 48–69.

[70]Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor*, 48–52.

[71]"Labor Drives South," 138.

[72]MacKaye, "The CIO Invades Dixie," 97.

diligence, and how one person in one Local Union in such a situation contrasts with those of us who have more facilities and more abilities. I decided we don't have too many impossible problems after all!"[73] The director of IWA operations in Alabama reported in October 1946 that "The relative slowness of the drive in textiles does not reflect the success of the drive as a whole in this state. Tremendous victories have been won in this state in wood, steel and auto."[74]

* * * * * *

Several sources indicated that eastern North Carolina's lumber industry was the most promising area to test the CIO's chances to organize black southerners. Solidly within the ideological mainstream of the CIO, the Woodworkers' union posed no threat of deviating from official policies or tactics.[75] In December of 1946 the North Carolina Department of Labor reported that 64 saw and planing mills employed 5490 workers in the state. When combined with workers at seven pulp and paper mills, wood products industries employed over 10,000 North Carolinians.[76] "Working quietly" to recruit workers in these mills an African-American IWA organizer had already met with some early success. The IWA representative notified the Southern Organizing Committee that the "chances are exceptionally favorable" for organizing the "several hundred woodworkers" in southern Virginia and eastern North Carolina.[77]

Impressed by the IWA's initial forays into the coastal plain of the Carolinas and southern Virginia, the CIO sent a team of three organizers to set up headquarters in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. Barely recovered from his defeat at Kannapolis, D.L. Culver led the CIO's second major campaign in North Carolina. He was assisted by Elijah Jackson and Frank Evans, a white IWA organizer. According to the lumber organizing team, "organization at the beginning was slow, but it picked up momentum as the campaign progressed."[78] After a few months, the lumber team accelerated the pace of organizing by concentrating on the region's largest mill, Greene Brothers Lumber Company, in Elizabethtown. This move reflected a common tactic during Operation Dixie: organizing the "toughest customer" in a particular industry with the goal of inspiring organization at smaller mills. In October of 1946 the CIO established shop committees in each division of the Greene Brothers plant.

Conforming to racial employment patterns in the industry, the IWA's new locals were nearly all African-American. The union created a racially balanced executive committee at a mill in Kinston, North Carolina, with a white president and treasurer and a black vice-president and recording secretary. The local's board of directors, with one white and two black workers, more closely reflected the racial balance of the company's workforce, which was two-thirds black. Considering the segregated context in which it was organized, an organizer understated the local's achievement when he called it "somewhat democratic."[79]

---

[73] *Proceedings of the 10th Annual Constitutional Convention of the International Woodworkers of America-CIO. Canadian Congress of Labor*, Portland, OR, Sept. 10, 1946.

[74] Edmund F. Ryan, letter to George Baldanzi, NC State Director, CIO Southern Organizing Drive, Oct. 26, 1946, CIO Organizing Committee Papers, Box 53, Folder 1, Duke University Special Collections, Perkins Library, Durham, NC.

[75] On the history of the IWA see Jerry Lembcke and William M. Tattam, *One Union in Wood* (New York: International Publishers, 1984).

[76] William Smith, letter to Mr. Claude Ballard, Dec. 27, 1946, OD Papers, Box 59, Folder 1.

[77] R. Wray Alt to William Smith, State Director NC-CIO, June 10, 1946, ODP, Box 59, Folder 1.

[78] "Synopsis of Events at Greene Brothers Lumber Company, Elizabethtown, N.C."

[79] R. Wray Alt to Mr. William Botkins, Memphis, Oct. 22, 1946, ODP Box 59, Folder 1.

In Elizabethtown, organization at the Greene Brothers Lumber Company matched regional trends. Of 182 black workers in the Greenes' mill and logging operations, 133 joined the union in 1947. Only seven of 48 white workers joined, and only one of them paid his dues. In part, this phenomenon reflected the concentration of African-American workers in heavy, less-skilled jobs where union support was strongest. But racial solidarities overshadowed differences in status as most skilled black workers at the mill also joined the union. Of 24 black workers in the planing mill, 15 skilled machine operators joined Local s-489. So did Solomon Owens, the mill's only black foreman.[80]

By February 1947 organizers claimed support from a majority of Greene Brothers employees and the CIO certified Elizabethtown's first union local. Following Operation Dixie procedure, the CIO transferred administration of Local s-489 to the IWA, the international union that would receive all lumber locals organized during the southern drive. CIO North Carolina director William Smith then asked the Greenes to recognize Local s-489 as the exclusive bargaining agency for the company's workers and to enter into negotiations for a contract.[81] The lumber team expanded their focus to companies in Elizabeth City, Wilmington, and Fayetteville and, after the Greenes' refused to recognize Local s-489, the Southern Organizing Committee petitioned for a certification election in Elizabethtown. They included in the petition 90 workers at the Southern Pine Lumber Mill which was also in Elizabethtown.[82]

The election, which would be conducted by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), was likely the first time since Reconstruction that federal officials had enforced the rights of African-Americans in Elizabethtown. Filed at a time when NLRB enforcement mechanisms were crippled by backlogs and Congressional amendments, however, only local union action would be able to enforce the protection provided by federal law.[83] William Smith boasted in February 1947 that North Carolina organizers had won elections in three lumber mills, petitioned for elections in six others, and initiated organizing drives in four other mills. As a result of their success, however, organizers had their "hands full" and could not "handle the administrative burden" of servicing the new locals. In addition, organizers were "now being attacked" with bills in the North Carolina legislature that would have prohibited unions from signing contracts that included either dues checkoff or closed shop provisions. These "right-to-work" bills passed the North Carolina House by an "overwhelming majority."[84]

Following the Southern Pine Association's advice to avoid direct violation of federal labor law, the Greenes agreed to an NLRB-monitored election on April 18, 1947. The company then spent the intervening weeks trying to defeat the union on local ground.[85] They and other lumber companies in eastern North Carolina hired John A. Stevens, a "strong anti-union attorney" who had represented North Carolina Shipbuilding

[80]Membership lists, Green [sic] Brothers Lumber Company, 1947; Affidavit, Solomon Owens, September–October, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[81]William Smith to Green [sic] Brothers Lumber Company, Feb. 6, 1947, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[82]"Synopsis of Events at Greene Brothers Lumber Company, Elizabethtown, N.C.;" John J. Brownlee, "Petition for Certification of Representatives," International Woodworkers of America, District 4 Records, 1943–1959, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta, 238/1290, Feb. 11, 1947.

[83]See Zieger, *The CIO*, 246–252. On the NLRB in the South see Timothy J. Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For?*, 32–37.

[84]William Smith to Mr. John Harkins, Feb. 26, 1947, OD Papers, Box 59, Folder 1.

[85]P. C. Gaffney to Mr. C. W. Greene, Feb. 7, 1947, Southern Pine Association Collection, Box 316, Folder 2–5.1; Ben Greene, interview with author, May 16, 1996.

Company during the Wilmington union drive.[86] The company fired "several enthusiastic" union men and transferred others to "unpleasant jobs."[87] By April, according to union organizers, "a concerted anti-union campaign [was] in full swing" throughout the region.[88] Stevens arranged for the Greenes to hire an interracial pair of workers who had helped to defeat the CIO's drive at North Carolina Shipbuilding Company. "We kept the union out of the shipyards," one of these workers said on the morning of the election, "and we can keep it out of Greene Brothers."[89]

When persuasion and bribery failed to defeat the union, the company resorted to violence. On the day of the election, a foreman hit a worker on the head as he left his job to vote. The mill superintendent then held the worker while the foreman found a piece of lumber with which to beat him. The worker escaped, but the company had him arrested and sentenced to 90 days of hard labor "on the roads." The local sheriff ordered him to leave the county upon completion of his sentence.[90] According to another union member, managers removed him from the voting line and warned him "to get away before he got in trouble with the white folks." In contrast to their harassment of union members, the Greenes served whiskey to those who voted against the union.[91]

Despite the company's efforts, 171 out of 230 workers at Greene Brothers voted in favor of the union on April 18.[92] Impressed by black workers' support for the union, William Smith put Elijah Jackson in charge of the organizing team. He increased the staff to six men that June, and promised two more in the following weeks. Nine elections had already been won in North Carolina, and three more were pending. With four new drives underway in Fayetteville, the union moved their headquarters to Kinston, a more central location than Elizabeth City. "Things have progressed so well," the North Carolina director wrote to IWA headquarters, "that we have decided to extend our activities over the entire eastern part of the state and all the way up to the Virginia line."[93]

The pro-union vote in Elizabethtown strengthened organization at other mills, organizers reported, but employers' stalling gave "anti-union forces plenty of time to completely destroy and demoralize union members." For two months after the vote at Greene Brothers, John Stevens ignored union requests for contract negotiations, and he managed to delay meetings nearly a whole year. The following year, workers voted for unions at 25 southern lumber companies, bringing to 64 the total number of southern woodworker locals.[94] Of the 19 North Carolina locals that had won NLRB elections since the beginning of the lumber campaign, only six secured contracts with their respective companies before the end of 1948.[95] In April of that year, the organizing

[86]Townsend and Lacewell, Affidavit, Sept. 22, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[87]"Synopsis of Events at Greene Brothers Lumber Company, Elizabethtown, N.C.," Barney Hayes, Affidavit, Sept./Oct. 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[88]"Synopsis of Events at Greene Brothers Lumber Company, Elizabethtown, N.C."

[89]Lacewell, Affidavit, Sept. 22, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[90]Jerry Ratcliff, Affidavit, Oct. 26, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[91]"Synopsis of Events at Greene Brothers Lumber Company, Elizabethtown, N.C.," 4.

[92]"Tally of Ballots," NLRB, ODP, Box 64, Folder 1.

[93]William Smith to Mr. J.E. Fadling, IWA, Portland, June 11, 1947, ODP Box 59, Folder 1.

[94]*Proceedings of the 11th Annual Constitutional Convention of the International Woodworkers of America-CIO. Canadian Congress of Labor*, St. Louis, MO, Aug. 26, 1947.

[95]A.E. Boadle, Southern Pines Labor Information Service, letter to J. Clifford Miller, Feb. 15, 1954, Southern Pine Association Records, Box 332, Folder 2–5, 14.

team reported that the election at Greene's had "been won almost a year now and nothing has been accomplished."[96]

To force the company into negotiations and to counter intimidation, Frank Evans requested aid from the North Carolina Commissioner of Labor. After the state labor official refused to intervene, explaining that he was over-booked that week, Evans contacted the National Labor Relations Board. The federal agency replied that federal labor law required "state conciliation where ever possible." When organizers actually met with John Stevens in June of 1948, they "got absolutely nothing."[97]

A speaker at the IWA's convention in October of 1948 explained that company evasion the previous summer left the union with no alternative but to strike one of the mills in eastern North Carolina. "Unless we were able to force the operators to sign good working agreements with our union," he recalled, "then we would have to simply forget about further organizational work." Having stalled the organizing drive in Elizabethtown, the united effort of the lumber companies showed signs of turning back previous gains. On July 7, employees voted 69 to 40 against the IWA at Belhaven Veneer and Plywood Company at Belhaven, NC. *Southern Lumberman*, the main trade magazine of the industry, boasted that Belhaven had been "one of the first elections in Eastern North Carolina where the company won."[98] Alarmed by the loss, organizers enlisted support for a strike from workers at surrounding mills and then headed to Elizabethtown to write up "strike plans" for Local s-489.[99] "We were convinced that we had to pick out the key operation there, organize for a strike" and secure a contract that could serve as a model for other mills.[100]

The day after the vote in Belhaven, local union officers prepared a chart "breaking down the plant into departments" and listing each employee with his job and union membership status noted. They recorded the names of trucking companies, the amount of finished lumber in stock, and the location of logging operations in order to determine the Greenes' ability to operate in spite of the strike. A strike committee began meeting regularly for training and selection of picket captains and lieutenants, and the union opened a strike commissary equipped with relief application forms and relief baskets. To pay for provisions, the visiting committee delivered an "appeal for funds letter" to other CIO locals in North Carolina.[101]

Impressed by Local s-489's initial support for Operation Dixie, IWA organizers still worried that racial oppression would prevent black workers from carrying through with their campaign. In the week that the strike was to begin, Dean Culver wrote to the *International Woodworker* that "the Greene Brothers are awful big and powerful people in this little town and this strike is the first time anybody has ever stood up to them in any way." He feared that "a lot of people were so beat down they wouldn't fight in open defiance of the Greene Brothers." Desperate to alleviate the racial tensions of the strike, he tried to build a relief committee with three whites and two blacks, and the strike

[96]"Synopsis of Events at Greene Brothers Lumber Company, Elizabethtown, N.C.," 10–12; "The Elizabethtown Story: How An Anti-Union Company Forced Their Workers to Strike," ODP Box 66, Folder 5.

[97]Frank Evans to William Smith, June 23, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Box 66, Folder 5. "Synopsis of Events at Greene Brothers Lumber Company, Elizabethtown, N.C.," 10–12.

[98]"Company Wins Over Union," *Southern Lumberman*, Aug. 1, 1948, 72.

[99]Frank Evans, letter to William Smith, June 23, 1948, ODP Box 66, Folder 5.

[100]*Proceedings of the 18th and 19th Annual Constitutional Convention of the International Woodworkers of America-CIO. Canadian Congress of Labor*, Portland, OR, Oct. 11–15, 1948.

[101]"Strike Plans—Greene Brothers—Elizabethtown," July 16, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

committee was to have four whites and three colored—"if possible." Such a composition was unlikely as only seven whites had joined the union, and of those seven only Troy Riley paid his dues.[102] A few days later Culver requested that 15–30 white workers be sent from other locals to support the strike effort. As a union office worker reported, "He says that if it can be kept a straight strike he feels that we can win it; however, he is afraid of a race riot if we don't get some white support."[103]

Despite organizers' fears, black workers refused to back down in the face of the Greenes. On the morning of July 16, they gathered near the gates of the mill, where they stood smoking or talking in small groups.[104] At the time when they would normally have headed for work, Culver wrote to William Smith, strikers "fell out in four groups behind the sound truck, carrying the signs, and … marched on the plant to the tune of the stars and stripes forever." The organizer described the action as "wonderful … It looked like an army."[105] Building upon local community networks and their wartime experiences, black workers turned to the CIO as an institutional base for their rising social and political aspirations.

FIG. 2. Greene Brothers employees in their union hall in Elizabethtown.

While union organizers underestimated black Elizabethtown's potential, white businessmen perceived a clear threat to the race and class hierarchies that were so closely aligned in eastern North Carolina. Learning of the early morning march and picket line on July 16, store owner Floyd Cross drove to the gates of the mill where, armed with a shotgun, he "attempted to create a riot" and "to incite the local business people to violence against the pickets."[106] Company owner Alvin H. Greene urged delivery truck drivers to run over strikers on their way into the plant. "Don't ever stand there and wait

[102]*Ibid.*

[103]Dean L. Culver, transcript of telephone report, July 21, 1498 [sic;1948], ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[104]"Strike Ends in IWA Victory," *International Woodworker*, Dec. 29, 1948, 8.

[105]"Bargaining Rights at Issue: Elizabethtown Woodworkers Challenge Lumber Barons In Fight for Living Wage," *International Woodworker*, July 28, 1948, 1; Dean L. Culver, letter to William Smith, July 17, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[106]"Synopsis of Events at Greene Brothers Lumber Company, Elizabethtown, N.C."

on them," he ordered.[107] The Bladen County Junior Chamber of Commerce blamed the union for "fomenting prejudice and hate" and destroying the "peaceful life of this community." This group of aspiring young businessmen charged the IWA-CIO with disrupting "not only race relations but also private enterprise which is the bulwark of this nation."

In a series of leaflets the Jaycees and the CIO traded interpretations of the strike. "The demands of the Union are excessive and absurd," claimed the Jaycees. The union responded that its demands were just, regardless of race: "Do you think sixty cents an hour is fair to pay for workers—white and colored—skilled and unskilled?" The Jaycees pointed out that the Greenes paid more than most lumber mills in the region. In the minds of white supremacists, "fair" payment was never the same for workers "white and colored."[108]

Bladen County had no black press, and the white-owned newspapers supported the company unanimously. The *Bladen Journal*, published by Greene family friend Mrs. E. F. McCulloch, carried regular editorial denunciations of the CIO's "invasion of southern industry." Echoing the Jaycees, McCulloch assured readers that "Labor's big stick—a strike" would not upset "free enterprise" in Bladen County. "The general reception of the strike," she reported, "has been unfavorable to the labor union in this and surrounding communities." The Wilmington *Morning Star* likewise assured readers that the union drive had not yet affected production, reporting that bad weather was to blame for decreased production that year.[109] Local press stirred such opposition to the strike that a week after it started Culver wrote to the Southern Organizing Committee that he was "very worried" about the following Monday. Tensions were already high and "the company might try to reinforce the opposition who were taunting the pickets … If they crash the pickett [sic], it may be hell to pay."[110]

A half-page advertisement in the *Bladen Journal* urged workers not to be "Fooled By the C.I.O." If workers sided with the union, the paper argued, mill owners would leave the county: "Will the CIO give you a job?" Wages would not increase "under CIO rule," the advertisement continued, and union "dues and assessments will milk you dry." The advertisement even boasted of John Stevens' work in Wilmington, claiming that the city had a chance to secure a permanent shipyard "because Wilmington licked the CIO. Let's keep the sawmills in Bladen County." Whether it was accurate or not, the advertisement's by line reflected the power of racial politics in this growing conflict: "Paid advertisement by Negro Citizens of Elizabethtown, N.C."[111]

As the strike persisted, local merchants turned increasingly violent in their opposition

---

[107]Signed statement, Sept. 30, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[108]"Jaycees Hit Local Strike," *Bladen Journal*, July 22, 1948; "Jaycees Hit CIO Pamphlet," *Bladen Journal*, Aug. 19, 1948; "Jaycees Hit by CIO Paper," *Bladen Journal*, Aug. 12, 1948. In 1949, the average North Carolina mill paid 62 cents for unskilled labor and 70 cents for skilled. North Carolina was roughly average for southern states. "Southern Pine Wages for Specific Job Classifications," July 25, 1949, ODP Box 54, Folder 1.

[109]Ben Greene, interview with author, Mar. 29, 1996; "CIO Orders Strike at Local Plant," *Bladen Journal*, July 15, 1948; "Strike in Fifth Week Here; Southern Pine May Face Strike," *Bladen Journal*, Aug. 12, 1948; "Greene Lumber Mill Re-Opens; Strike Goes On," *Bladen Journal*, Aug. 4, 1948; "Leads Nation in Saw Mills: Southeastern North Carolina Mills Are Named in State Report," *Wilmington Morning Star*, July 19, 1948, 8; "Farm Forester W.W. Barnes Talks of Lumber Industry," *Wilmington Morning Star*, July 31, 1948, 6.

[110]Dean L. Culver, transcript of telephone report, July 21, 1984 [sic; 1948].

[111]Clipping in International Woodworkers of America File, Oversized Cabinet 32, Duke University Special Collections, Perkins Library, Durham, NC.

to the union. On October 4, striker Avant Wright overheard his sister-in-law telling his wife about a meeting of white business owners that she witnessed at Floyd Cross's home where she worked. "If Greene has to sign with the union," Wright's sister heard one businessman tell the others, "it is going to be hard for all of us." Wright thought nothing of this report until the following day when an IWA organizer's car was dynamited. As a hardware store owner, Cross had access to blasting caps, and union organizers concluded that the Greene Brothers' supporters "must be reaching the desperation stage."[112]

Making no attempt to protect strikers from such attacks, local police provided consistent support for the Greene Brothers. On September 22, 1948, after a non-union worker was shot in the "colored quarters," seven carloads of police rushed into the black community where they began searching, arresting, and imprisoning strikers "without regard," according to a union report, "to any reasonable suspicion or evidence." Three strikers were held overnight without legal counsel and one was taken to the State Bureau of Investigation in Raleigh for a lie detector test. Police turned several strikers over to A. H. Greene for questioning, and obeyed company requests not to arrest scabs for any offense.[113]

Outside of Elizabethtown, employers moved to defend white control over the black labor market. Junius Greene traveled 50 miles to Lumberton where he convinced a logging contractor and the Export Tobacco Company not to hire striking workers. The company also sought to evict strikers from company housing. One striker took a part-time job picking cotton at a nearby farm. Federal labor law prevented the Greenes from evicting strikers who did not take full-time work elsewhere, but by convincing the farmer to claim the union member as a full-time worker, the company freed itself to evict him and twelve other strikers from company housing.[114]

Police arrested several union supporters on the day of the election, and throughout the strike they drove deliveries and non-union workers through the line. At night policemen terrorized the workers' quarters, shining search lights through windows and conducting random searches and arrests. After a fire broke out in the mill yard one evening, the Sheriff deputized plant managers and owners to carry arms and to make arrests. The new deputies shot into one suspect's house and booked him on assault charges after he fired back. Even the local tax collector lent his aid by arresting 23 strikers for failure to list taxes. By October, police officers had arrested 80 more and, according to the union, were vowing "to fill the jails full of strikers." Isabelle Bullard, the wife of a non-union worker discovered the extent of the Greenes' influence over local justice after her husband returned from a night of drinking. Still intoxicated, he slapped her and began to "abuse her" until she called the police. Law officers arrested Mr. Bullard, but released him shortly thereafter, informing Bullard that the Greenes had forbidden them to arrest any loyal company employees. In contrast to their treatment of company supporters, Elizabethtown police arrested 136 strikers between June and November.[115]

---

[112]William Wagner Weiss to Ted, Oct. 5, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[113]"Synopsis of Events at Greene Brothers Lumber Company, Elizabethtown, N.C.," 17.

[114]Solomon Owens, Affidavit, Sept.–Oct., 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[115]Jerry Ratcliff, Affidavit, Oct. 26, 1948, ODP 64, 4; "Synopsis of Incidents," William Weiss, Affidavit, July 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5; Ben Greene, interview with author, Mar. 29, 1996; Culver, report July 21, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5; "Motion for Temp. Injunction," Oct. 1948, ODP 64, 3; "Synopsis of Incidents," 18.

Frank Evans' plea to the Commission of Labor remained unanswered, and Dean Culver fared no better when he requested that the North Carolina Board of Health investigate "unsanitary" conditions in the workers' quarters.[116] In August of 1948, North Carolina Governor R. Gregg Cherry responded to Culver's request for aid, apologizing that the state had "no facilities" for investigating alleged "illegal collusion" between local officials and the Greene Brothers. Displaying the futility of pursuing state intervention on behalf of black workers, the governor explained that he could only act in this regard upon the request of "law enforcement authorities of the affected area."[117] Culver filed a second complaint with the U.S. Department of Justice, promising to "back up this appeal with testimony" from strikers who had been arrested and fined by local law officers.[118] The union collected affidavits from strikers, and compiled an extensive report of negligence on the part of local law enforcement and courts of "their intended function of dealing impartial justice to all."[119] To provide "relief for our members," the union demanded $500,000 in back pay.[120]

Increasing federal protection for black civil rights provided essential support for a growing movement against Jim Crow in the 1940s and 1950s. As CIO organizers discovered in Elizabethtown, however, federal pressure had little impact when not coupled with action at the local level, a sphere where "impartial justice" had little meaning.[121] In what would prove a fruitless effort to recruit white support for the strike, organizers explained the "union story" to leading white merchants and professionals. A flyer prepared for this purpose explained that the company store and housing undercut housing and food prices in town. "It's your fight too!" the union attempted to convince Floyd Cross and other businessmen.[122] Shortly after the strike began, Culver discovered that Elijah Jackson provoked particularly violent reactions from strike opponents, and that it was "unsafe to leave the picketts [sic] out at any time without one white organizer there with them at all times." The strike leader requested that the CIO transfer to Elizabethtown a white organizer whose "soundness on the colored problem and his size and open friendly personality make him fit this situation perfectly."[123]

As organizers sought to neutralize the racial tensions sparked by the strike, white and even Native American workers held fast to racial alliances. Mr. Kissam, a white worker who Alvin Greene called a "jack of all trades," traveled throughout Bladen County to market tobacco sticks that the mill produced while operating with a partial workforce. Lewis Bird was a white painter at the mill, but during the strike he drove a log truck. "Everybody diversified," Greene recalled, noting that Bird's lack of experience cost him a finger when he caught it in a chain while logging for the Greenes. Alvin's cousin Ben claimed that Native American workers eagerly crossed the picket line at his father's mill. "The Indians were sort of anti-black," he recalled, admitting that he didn't know

[116]J.M. Jarret, letter to Dr. R.S. Cromartie, Aug. 6, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[117]R. Gregg Cherry, letter to D.L. Culver, Aug. 31, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[118]D.L. Culver, letter to the Civil Liberties Division of the U.S. Department of Justice. Aug. 24, 1948, Governor R. Gregg Cherry Collection, Box 2, Bladen County Folder, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

[119]Press Release, "CIO Asks Federal Investigation at Elizabethtown," Aug. 26, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[120]Dean L. Culver, letter to U.S. Department of Justice, Aug. 23, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[121]On efforts to bring federal decisions to bear on local politics see Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, and John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

[122]"The Elizabethtown Story."

[123]Dean L. Culver, letter to William Smith, July 17, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

enough "about Indian philosophy" to explain their behavior.[124] Relying upon 60 "white scabs," 40 of whom were company foremen and supervisors, the company began limited production in mid-August. "The situation is tense," reported William Smith, "and the entire community is fighting us."[125]

Black communities in Elizabethtown and surrounding areas also mobilized along racial lines. Since association with the strike meant loss of jobs for teachers, they lent money and other covert support to strikers and their families. Female relatives of many strikers worked as cooks, maids, and nannies in the homes of strike opponents and, like Avant Wright's sister-in-law who overheard the dynamite plot, domestic workers spied on strike opponents. The self-employed gave more openly. Leah Betty Lewis opened her Victory Beauty Shop as a meeting place for strikers' wives, and she allowed union organizers to leave relief baskets there for women to pick up on their way home from work. Reverend Cotton lent his preaching skills, leading songs and coordinating marches at the company gates.[126] Five, ten, and twenty dollar donations flowed in from newly organized IWA locals in nearby Washington, Elizabeth City, and Tarrboro.[127]

As the strike continued, CIO leaders began to recognize the power of racial solidarity in local black communities. In a mid-September report, William Smith praised Local s-489's ability to "get the scabs out as fast as the company gets them in." The Greene Brothers had "tried desperately to increase its work force," scouting the surrounding communities in search of replacement workers, but the mill never operated at more than 50% and it was constantly surrounded by 45–60 pickets. Smith praised the "splendid morale situation" on the picket line. "This strike MUST BE WON," he declared, and "we can win it."[128]

The Greenes stepped up attempts to force workers back to their jobs. Within three months of the walkout, the company evicted 20 workers from their homes.[129] In August, Smith reported that "wholesale evictions" from company housing had strained the resources of the local severely.[130] In mid-September, the end of the tobacco harvest increased the number of available workers in the area, further taxing the pickets.[131] The Greenes' practice of loaning money to their workers strengthened a dependent relationship that the union had difficulty replacing. Solomon Barnwell was so accustomed to company credit that he asked mill superintendent Beasley for a loan shortly before the strike began. Beasley refused to lend money to any worker who belonged to the CIO.[132] While the strike itself indicates that paternalism did not produce automatic dependence, company control over daily life in Elizabethtown took its toll on the striking workers.

Smith emphasized the need to maintain "present discipline and unity" by intensifying "picket line activity." Dean Culver reported back to him that an equally important aspect of the strike included visiting other communities to dissuade workers from crossing the picket line. Smith agreed to the need to visit "scab's houses to talk to

[124]Ben Greene, interview with author, Mar. 29, 1996.

[125]William Smith, letter to Claude Hale, Aug. 11, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[126]Orie and Louise Tyson, interview with author, Sept. 1, 1996; Lewis and McDowell, interview with author.

[127]"Accounting of Strike Fund, Elizabethtown, NC strike," Aug. 22–Sept. 30, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[128]Smith, "Notes on Elizabethtown," Sept. 14, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[129]"Motion for Injunction," Oct., 1948, ODP, Box 64, File 3.

[130]William Smith, letter to Claude Hale, Aug. 11, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[131]Culver, letter to Smith, Sept. 15, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[132]Solomon Barnwell, Affidavit, Sept. 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

FIG. 3. An IWA-sponsored Christmas party at a church in Elizabethtown.

them," advising that "wherever possible, strikers should be used for this."[133] To support these local efforts, Smith ordered two organizers to devote full-time hours in Elizabethtown. Their work at other mills, he reasoned, "by and large," would be "wasted effort" since without a victory in the Greene Brothers strike they would "not get any contracts in the North Carolina wood industry."[134]

In addition to providing legal and administrative aid, the IWA gathered financial support that became critical to the continuation of the strike. Culver repeatedly wrote to Smith requesting increased funding and payment of legal expenses.[135] The *International Woodworker* carried strike reports that stressed the need for financial contributions.[136] "With things pending now," Frank Evans told delegates to the IWA convention that October, "they all depend upon the success of this strike in Elizabethtown, North Carolina."[137] Solicitations to northern locals proved well worth the effort.[138] In mid-September, Smith reported that the strike effort was surviving on weekly $500 donations from the IWA International and West Coast Offices. Since court costs exceeded that amount, the North Carolina director continued to write personal letters to northern locals. Between August 25 and September 30, the local received $3300 from the IWA locals in the Pacific Northwest.[139]

Support from the International allowed black workers in eastern North Carolina to sustain their strike just long enough to force the company into negotiations.[140]

---

[133]Culver, letter to Smith, Sept. 15, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5; William Smith, North Carolina Director, CIO Organizing Committee, "Greene Brothers Lumber Company, Elizabethtown, NC," Sept. 14, 1948, regional office, ODP Microfilm, Reel 6.

[134]William Smith, "Greene Brothers Lumber Company, Elizabethtown, NC," Sept. 14, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 6.

[135]"Accounting of Strike Fund, Elizabethtown, NC strike," Aug. 22–Sept. 30, 1948, ODP, Reel 5; Culver, letter to Smith, Sept. 15, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[136]"North Carolina Strike Continues Solid Front," *International Woodworker*, Aug. 18, 1948.

[137]Frank Evans, Address to 12th Annual Convention, IWA-CIO, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[138]Frank Evans, letters to IWA locals, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[139]"Accounting of Strike Fund, Elizabethtown, NC strike," Aug. 22–Sept. 30, 1948, ODP Microfilm, Reel 5.

[140]B.E. Davis, letter to Greene Brothers Lumber Co., Nov. 24, 1948, ODP Box 64, File 4.

According to Ben Greene, who assisted his father Cecil with contract negotiations, union members gave up the strike in mid-December, walking into the office to beg for their jobs.[141] The *International Woodworker* reported a more dramatic ending to the strike, claiming that Local s-489 "tasted from the sweet cup of victory" when the Greenes "suddenly capitulated and signed a contract" with the union.[142] Whatever the exact sequence of events that preceded the end of the strike, even Ben Greene agreed that, after a five-month standoff, roughly 200 black workers finally sat down to discuss the terms of their employment with one of the largest lumber companies in the southeastern United States. Confronted by a unified African-American community and facing a $500,000 fine if the NLRB sided with the union, the Greene Brothers Lumber Company had no alternative but to negotiate.

* * * * * *

As CIO organizers had hoped in 1946, the settlement of the Elizabethtown strike did strengthen organization in other North Carolina lumber mills. In late 1946, the IWA had 48 locals in the South, but none in North Carolina.[143] By 1947 64 locals operated in southern towns, and by the fall of 1949, 11 of 74 southern locals were in North Carolina.[144] IWA locals signed strong contracts in six eastern North Carolina mills in the following year, including one at the Southern Pine Mill in Elizabethtown. "There's good leadership at that mill," reported an IWA representative.[145] The IWA's strength in the South peaked in 1952, when 87 southern locals sent voting representatives to the union's international convention in Portland. Thirteen of them were from North Carolina, and others came from South Carolina and southern Virginia.[146]

Black workers renewed the CIO's campaign to organize the South. The CIO Southern School for Workers began teaching classes in union management and labor history in 1951, and supported union members who were "determined to be qualified voters" in North Carolina's upcoming Senatorial elections.[147] More than a 1000 woodworkers and their families, nearly all of them African-American, gathered for "fun" and "serious talk about labor's problems" at a Labor Day celebration that year in Washington, North Carolina.[148] Mainstream newspapers across the state covered the meeting, each of them noting the "political angle" taken at the "mostly colored" meeting.[149] Nine black men and a black woman "took a leading role" in a 1951

[141]Ben Greene, interview with author, Mar. 29, 1996.

[142]"Strike Ends," *International Woodworker*, Dec. 24, 1948.

[143]*Procedings of the 10th Annual Constitutional Convention of the International Woodworkers of America-CIO. Canadian Congress of Labor*, 1946.

[144]*Proceedings of the 11th Annual Constitutional Convention of the International Woodworkers of America-CIO. Canadian Congress of Labor*, St. Louis, MO, Aug. 26, 1947; *Proceedings of the 13th Annual Constitutional Convention of the International Woodworkers of America-CIO. Canadian Congress of Labor*, Vancouver, British Colombia, Canada, Sept. 26–30, 1949.

[145]"NLRB Report," Feb. 2, 1951, ODP 66, 7; "Working Agreement, IWA-CIO and Roper Lumber Company," Mar. 31, 1951, ODP 66, 7; *International Woodworker*, April 26, 1950, 5; *International Woodworker*, Feb. 28, 1951, 10; "Here's Southern 'Roundup'," *International Woodworker*, Oct. 22, 1952, 2.

[146]*Proceedings of the 16th Annual Constitutional Convention of the International Woodworkers of America-CIO Canadian Congress of Labor*, Portland, OR, Sept. 15–19, 1952.

[147]"North Carolina Locals Forging Ahead in 1950," *International Woodworker*, June 26, 1950.

[148]" 'Labor Day Celebration'," *International Woodworker*, Sept. 26, 1951, 16.

[149]"Talks Highlight Union Rally Here," *Washington Daily News*, Sept. 4, 1951, 1; "1000 at Tri-State Meet," *Charlotte Observer*, Sept. 1, 1952; "Labor Day Rites Set in Beaufort," [Raleigh] *News and Observer*, Aug. 31, 1951.

convention of the NC State CIO Political Action Committee.[150] The following year, the Carolinas Council of the IWA elected a black man to their only permanent office and passed a resolution denouncing the Ku Klux Klan.[151]

Impressed by black workers' support for IWA locals in eastern North Carolina, union leaders began to reconsider their "economic approach" to organizing in the South. The *International Woodworker* reported that despite the work of "organized Labor and race relations groups" there was "still much to be done yet" to improve conditions for black workers. In addition to facing "brutality, a peonage system, low pay and long hours in the lumber industry," black workers were charged higher prices at company stores than whites were. Indicating that promotion of racial equality might still be associated with leftism, a black local official from Arkansas clarified that "We'll continue to fight for democracy forever rather than accept that communism though."[152]

Reflecting the union's new sensitivity to racial politics after the Elizabethtown strike, the *International Woodworker* began to reveal the racial context of southern organizing in a way that it never did during the first years of Operation Dixie. In the paper's initial coverage of eastern North Carolina, workers were described as "beat down" and impoverished, but never as belonging to a particular racial group.[153] The paper reported on "attempts to create divisions among workers," but never clarified the nature of those divisions.[154] After supporting the southern campaign for nearly a year, northern readers may have been surprised by the photos printed in a full page story on the "IWA Victory" in Elizabethtown. Taken at various dates throughout the strike, the pictures showed for the first time that Local s-489 was nearly entirely composed of black workers.

After printing the Elizabethtown photos in December 1948, the *Woodworker* carried increasing numbers of stories, complete with pictures, revealing racial differences between workers. In addition to covering the Washington, North Carolina Labor Day celebrations, the newspaper carried a photo showing Indian, Jewish, Korean, white, and black representatives discussing "mutual problems" at the Canadian Congress of Labor's 1951 Convention.[155] A 1952 story reported that a regional IWA meeting in Alexandria, Louisiana "was attended by members of different races and creeds who thus gave conclusive proof that the fraternal spirit of democracy and justice is moving into the South along with the coming of the CIO woodworkers."[156]

Links between civil rights and labor activity in eastern North Carolina helped shape a new racial strategy that gained popularity among CIO leaders and other liberals in the late 1940s and early 1950s.[157] Having rejected leftist efforts to build a labor-based civil rights movement, liberal union leaders at first launched Operation Dixie with an "economic approach" that developed out of the multi-ethnic northern union drives of

[150]"PAC Meeting," *International Woodworker*, Nov. 14, 1951.

[151]*International Woodworker*, Nov. 12, 1952.

[152]"Labor Unions Aid Negroes in South, Delegates Assert," *International Woodworker*, Oct. 10, 1951, 3.

[153]*International Woodworker*, July 28, 1948, 1.

[154]*International Woodworker*, Aug. 18, 1948, 6.

[155]*International Woodworker*, Oct. 10, 1951, 13.

[156]*International Woodworker*, Aug. 13, 1952.

[157]Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," 1072. See also Robert Zieger, "A Venture into Unplowed Fields": Daniel Powell and CIO Political Action in the Post-War South," a paper presented as part of the program titled: "Labor in the Twentieth-Century South: A Festschrift in Honor of Gary M. Fink," Georgia State University, Atlanta, March 8, 1998 (publication forthcoming).

the 1930s. Based on the principle that shared shop-floor experience would overshadow social and cultural differences between workers, this model failed in the racially segregated workplaces of the South's largest industries. Black lumber workers provided an alternative organizing strategy. In a display of union militancy that was heightened by racial oppression, IWA locals in Elizabethtown, Washington, Elizabeth City, and other small towns defied white opposition to demand the right to organize and bargain collectively with their employers. Out of that struggle emerged a more broadly focused movement for black political rights.

By the end of 1948, when union leaders began to recognize the strength of union militancy that grew out of eastern North Carolina sawmill towns, it may have been too late to build a labor-based civil rights movement in the region. Disenfranchisement prevented black union members from participating in the challenge to a barrage of anti-union legislation that culminated in the 1947 Taft–Hartley Act. By limiting union political activity and strengthening employers' abilities to challenge unions, these legal defeats curbed union growth nationwide.[158] The IWA won 154 elections in southern sawmills between 1946 and 1950—bringing a total of 22,191 workers into potential IWA representation. In 1950, however, only a small portion of those represented by the union were actually paying dues.[159] "The picture is an ugly one," read a report from North Carolina. "We have lost over two thirds of the persons we organized. Consequently, over two thousand workers who placed their confidence in the union have slipped away and have lost their place in the organization through no fault of their own."[160]

The loss of federal protection for unions weakened Local s-489's ability to challenge the Greenes' domination of the local political economy. A boom in the lumber market allowed even non-union lumber companies to increase wages steadily in the early 1950s, dissipating economic benefits of union membership at the same time that legal protections for unions came under attack.[161] During contract negotiations in 1952, the Greene Brothers agreed to a five cent raise, overtime pay, seniority and a grievance procedure. But they refused to renew a dues check-off provision that had mandated them to deduct union dues from pay-checks and turn them over to the local.[162] Dues collection placed a heavy burden on local union officials, particularly after "right-to-work" laws allowed non-union "free riders" to benefit from union demands without joining and paying dues to the local.[163]

Strengthened in number during the strike, the white minority among Greene Brothers' employees continued to sap the strength of Local s-489. Local president Jonnie D. Lewis complained in 1951 that he had attempted "everything" to get whites

[158]Zieger, *The CIO*, 246–252.

[159]"Southern Regional Conference, International Woodworkers of America," Nov. 11, 1950, ODP Box 59, Folder 4.

[160]Bruce Davis, letter to Franz Daniel, Nov. 9, 1950, ODP Box 59, Folder 4.

[161]Ben Greene, interview with author, Mar. 29, 1996.

[162]Executive Committee, Local s-489 IWA-CIO, "Report of Contract Negotiations," n.d. [*c.* 1952], International Woodworkers of America, District 4 Records, 1943–1959, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta, 238/1291; "Agreement Between the Greene Brothers Lumber Company and its Employees Represented by International Woodworkers of America, CIO," Feb. 6, 1950, International Woodworkers of America, District 4 Records, 1943–1959, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta, 238/1291.

[163]Unsigned letter to Brother Lewis, Nov. 20, 1950, International Woodworkers of America, District 4 Records, 1943–1959, 238/1291; "Here's Southern 'Roundup'."

to join, but "it will take a white man to get them into the union."[164] Still refusing to recognize the racial politics behind this problem, IWA president J.E. Fadling responded that the "problem of organizing white workers" was not a racial issue. "Some-times workers, either white or colored, do not recognize the value of the Union and appear to shut their eyes to the fine benefits" of union membership.[165]

The union threatened a second strike over dues check-off in 1950.[166] Faced with continued company harassment, and worn down by nearly five years of battling the entire white community, however, union members had little energy to fight for such a modest demand. Thomas McDowell, who at one point served as president of Local s-489, was fired shortly after the end of the strike. He found it easier to find another job than to fight for reinstatement. Lonnie Johnson stayed on as the local's Secretary-Treasurer until the mill closed down in 1958, but he explained that the company intimidated the union into powerlessness long before the middle of the decade.[167] By 1957, according to the Elizabethtown Chamber of Commerce, "There [was] no organized labor in Bladen County."[168]

The demise of Local s-489 did not end black Elizabethtown's struggle for power. Adel McDowell and Leah Bettie Lewis, whose husbands Thomas and Jonnie had led Local s-489, helped form a Bladen County branch of the NAACP in the late 1950s. In the 1960s, both women became leaders in a wave of school strikes that made Elizabethtown the focal point, according to one scholar, of "probably the most serious" school desegregation conflict of North Carolina's Civil Rights Movement.[169] Both women traced the origins of the local civil rights movement to "a different attitude" that emerged in the wake of the 1948 strike. Whites "learned that we're not going to take that kind of treatment now," she explained, and blacks learned to "do something for themselves." "It started the ball rolling," another black woman recalled, setting the stage for more sustained black protest in the 1960s and 1970s.[170]

The history of Elizabethtown Local s-489 restores black workers to the debate over organized labor's failure in the South after the Second World War. By supporting Operation Dixie, even after many union leaders had given up on the campaign, and by linking union activity to the struggle for racial democracy in the 1940s, IWA locals in eastern North Carolina forced national union leaders to reconsider their devotion to the race-neutral liberalism of the 1930s. This reconsideration occurred too late to defend

---

[164]Johnnie D. Lewis, president IWA Local s-489, to Franz Daniel, May 17, 1951, ODP Box 59, Folder 5.

[165]J.E. Fadling, president IWA-CIO, to J.D. Lewis, president Local s-489, May 22, 1951, ODP Box 59, Folder 5.

[166]"You have wage increases coming—Not a cut!" Poster, Jan. 9, 1950, ODP Box 63, Folder 6.

[167]"Here's Southern 'Roundup'."

[168]Elizabethtown, North Carolina: An Invitation to Industry (Elizabethtown Chamber of Commerce, 1957), Local History Room, Elizabethtown Public Library; Lonnie Johnson [pseudonym], interview with author, May 16, 1996.

[169]On the civil rights movement in eastern North Carolina see David S. Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

[170]Orie and Louise Tyson, interview with author, and Lewis and McDowell, interview with author. Historians have only begun to explore the roots of civil rights activism in labor organization during the 1940s. For example, see Korstad and Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost," and Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*.

union locals from anti-union legislation of the late 1940s.[171] Uncertainty over racial strategy may also have contributed to white union members' hesitancy to follow their leaders into a coalition with civil rights organizations after 1954.[172] In addition to extending the Southern Campaign seven years beyond 1946, however, black union members forced CIO leaders to recognize the centrality of race in the struggle to unionize the South.

More than a lost cause or an unfulfilled promise, Operation Dixie was an important moment in the historical development of race and class politics in the United States. Historians have pointed out correctly that anti-communist and racially conservative union leaders restricted the CIO's support for racial justice in the late 1940s. Other historians are right to criticize those who underestimated additional limitations, imposed by southern politicians and white workers, that restricted even the most racially progressive organizers from launching a direct assault on Jim Crow. None the less, CIO strategies shifted during the seven-year southern organizing campaign. Neglected in previous accounts of Operation Dixie, black workers and their communities provided the inspiration for that shift.

[171]As Judith Stein shows, the new racial liberalism also dangerously ignored the economic changes that disproportionately affected black workers after the 1950s: *Running Steel, Running America: Race Economic Policy and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[172]Alan Draper indicates that white rank-and-file resentment to union civil rights measures in the early 1960s stemmed from union inaction on the issue in the 1950s: *Conflict of Interest: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, 1954–1968* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1994), 17–40.